Junk Food News and News Abuse

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Each year, the researchers at Project Censored devote some of their time to unearthing—and discussing—the most frivolous, time-consuming news pieces covered by the corporate media. This year’s selections were voted on by the 200 students, faculty, and media researchers who work with Project Censored and hundreds of others worldwide who are members of our weekly independent news listserv. We have two categories: “Junk Food News” and “News Abuse.” The Junk Food News section focuses on empty calorie news, while News Abuse details the way in which mainstream media misuse and obsess over tragic or horrific events.

As usual, the Junk Food News chapter is filled with celebrity gossip and drama. Due to the recent rise in reality entertainment now considered newsworthy, we also felt it necessary to pay some attention to the genre of reality television. This year, we examine the list of top reality shows that have begun to invade our mainstream news programs.

While there is nothing wrong with enjoying entertainment, when entertainment starts consuming the limited time and space for critical news stories, it becomes a problem. Entertainment, disguised as news, increasingly infects limited and valuable news space. We believe that real news—news about our leaders and the choices they make that impact our daily lives—ought to have first-place priority in news programming. Unfortunately, this kind of news seems to get less and less attention each time we put this chapter together. The
more Junk Food News desensitizes viewers, listeners, and readers, the more Americans are coaxed into accepting programs or news clips that have no real meaning or substance.

Our nation has become one that would rather sit down and tune off—and our waistlines show it. We love to know everything about those famous few, reveling in their glories and disasters, but claim that news about what is happening to people throughout the world is either too boring or “too depressing.” Television has become a way to detach from reality while, at the same time, somehow convincing the viewer that it is reality.

With so much competing for our attention on radio and TV, it is easy to become hypnotized by a media bombarding us with unnecessary babble. Yet as we become subjected to more and more of this type of programming, it is important to remember that a healthy media is crucial to a fully functioning democracy. While some may feel that the Junk Food News chapter is itself junk food news, this is an influential part of our culture that cannot—and should not—be ignored. These stories can tell us a little bit about what the majority values, and it gives some insight into how people think. In order to change people’s ideas, we must be able to understand them. If individuals do not look at the whole of what media has become, we cannot effectively understand or work to shift the current paradigms.

And so, every year, Project Censored spends some time documenting the most striking examples of Junk Food News and News Abuse, in an attempt to get a better understanding of what makes up our press and how it influences us.

Junk Food News

The Junk Food top 10 are always filled with celebrity gossip. Holding true to tradition, this year’s list is made up of the biggest celebrity happenings that were deemed important enough for coverage on your nightly news program. It is composed of many
familiar names—several of which were on our list last year. Here are the top 10 Junk Food News stories of the year:

1. Janet’s Super Bowl Exposure
2. Ben and J.Lo’s breakup
3. the Hilton sisters (especially Paris Hilton)
4. Britney Spears’ wedding
5. Martha Stewart
6. Britney and Madonna’s kiss
7. Trista and Ryan’s wedding
8. *American Idol*
9. the last episode of *Friends*
10. Ashton and Demi

Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore’s relationship, with a 15-year difference between them, created quite a stir in the headlines on paper, radio, and television. They turned heads and raised brows as the “young man, older lady” duo. At Project Censored, votes were counted, and the results showed that the couple made spot number 10 on this year’s Junk Food News list.

Number 9 this year includes the six guys and gals from the famous television show *Friends*. 2004 closed out the tenth year for the folks, creating a buzz among those who religiously watched the show every week and even for those who caught a show occasionally. Some called the finale the “Thursday Night Super Bowl.” *Friends* was a social phenomenon, and Monica, Chandler, Ross, Rachel, Joey, and Phoebe became the icons of a generation. As news of the show’s last episode made its way around, it dominated media attention and news headlines. Now that the show is over, what will everyone do? As the cast members adjust to their new life without *Friends*, they should have no trouble finding spare cash, considering the $1 million they made per episode toward the end. As for the rest of the people out there in the world, they will have to be satisfied with what was (and catching the reruns and buying the DVDs).
American Idol made number 4 on the Junk Food list last year, but slipped down a few notches to Number 8 for 2005. The show has remained a favorite for many, despite the cruel words from Simon ... perhaps that is what draws so many. Even after several seasons of this show, people still flock to their TV screens to vote for their favorite “Idols” and to see who will be kicked off next. American Idol results are often seen and heard on the morning news, updating the viewers on participants’ progress. Whether it is Simon or the “Idols” themselves, American Idol has become an instant “success” throughout America—and the media.

On the list for number 7 is the wedding of Trista Rehn and Ryan Sutter. Who would have known that a reality show would ever have produced true love and a million-dollar wedding? One must wonder why their relationship lasted while so many other television reality-show hookups floundered. It seems to be that the lovebirds were made for each other as much as they were for television. Millions across the world viewed their wedding. Ryan and Trista have been on countless television shows and magazine covers. Even Trista’s ring was star-for-a-day.

Landing on our list at number 6 is the kiss between Britney Spears and Madonna. Controversy seems to be their forté, and they created quite a stir with their lip-to-lip at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards show in New York. These two have separately been in the headlines for their entire careers—what better move than to create a headline with the both of them! Whoever thought this one up was a true genius of media hype and self-promotion. (Reportedly, it was Madonna herself.)

Amazingly, Martha Stewart moved up the list one spot from last year to number 5 this year. She is still an everpresent face in our court system, and her products can be found on the shelves at Kmart. This high profile case was dragged out by the media and has proven to be a guilty case of Junk Food News.

Britney Spears makes this year’s list again, coming in at Number 4 with her marriage to childhood friend Jason Alexander. The two were married on a Saturday in Las Vegas and had their marriage annulled the next Monday. Every move of Britney’s seems made to
create attention. The media loves her and her headlines dominate the news as well as the tabloids.

At number 3 are the Hilton sisters. Not many people had heard of them before this past year, but now it seems that wherever one looks on mainstream media, there they are, especially Paris Hilton. From her sex video to her appearance on *The Simple Life*, she’s demanded a lot of attention. Could it be that so many care about a rich girl who doesn’t even know what Wal-Mart is?

Coming in at number 2 is Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez’s breakup. They were making news even before they called their relationship off. For the second year in a row, J. Lo was in the news and on our top 10. From Ben and J. Lo’s on-again, off-again relationship, plenty of people were all over their every move. They graced the covers of magazines and tabloids, with people waiting anxiously and holding their breaths over what the couple would do next. The “rock” for “Jenny from the block” sat pretty on her finger for only so long. Even though Ben and J. Lo are over, they have not faded from celebrity gossip.

And the number 1 story is … Janet Jackson and her Super Bowl exposure. Sexuality was a topic discussed in last year’s Junk Food News chapter, and it remains a hot topic this year, as Janet’s Super Bowl exposure has shown us. It shocked our nation, and so did the FCC with their tizzy over a nipple. To reiterate last year’s chapter, “Nobody at the project would be averse to the media having a healthy, educational public discussion of the evolution of human sexuality within our culture”—or, for that matter, an in-depth public discussion about the problems with the FCC. But once again, most of the debate sparked by this event never rose above the level of the shallow or the inane.

The vulgarity and sleaziness of the rest of the Super Bowl halftime show seemed to slither back into the dark, not making headlines or an outrage. What about Kid Rock, who desecrated the American flag, flouncing around the stage with it on his back? Why was that not attacked by our media? There was also an “in your face” sexual overtone throughout the entire show, which was quickly overlooked. The issue of nudity, or slight nudity, remains a
topic with varied opinions, and as a result, has produced much controversy and headlines. Some see it as nothing terrible, while others cover their children’s eyes over a “fluke” exposure. Meanwhile, dancers rip off their costumes to such lyrics as “it’s getting hot in here so take off all your clothes,” from a song that’s everpopular with teens and preteens and is shown regularly on MTV. Others see incidences like the Super Bowl exposure as sexist, questioning why it was Janet, a woman, who created the controversy, while little attention was paid to her partner in crime, Justin Timberlake. Was the whole idea of “exposure” sexist? Could it be that the exposure of a single nipple has more importance than the issues of our nation and world that daily impact millions, or billions, of people? More weight is given to celebrity cries for attention than to the millions of children who are starving each day or to the men and women dying on foreign soil. As the Junk Food News section shows, media priorities are a bit warped.

News Abuse

Not to be confused with Junk Food News, News Abuse seeks to examine those stories that were manipulated and dragged out by the mainstream media. While all true news stories deserve mention, it is important to move on in a reasonable time frame. When the media attempt to attract viewers by repeating headlines ad nauseam, this is news abuse. News Abuse stories may be tragic in nature, as the Scott Peterson case has proved. They can also be events twisted into minireality soaps like the Michael Jackson saga or the Bush aircraft carrier landing. Whatever the event, all are examples of our nation’s corporate media abusing the limited space and time that should be allotted to the very current critical news of our world. Here is the News Abuse top 5 for 2005:

1. Jessica Lynch
2. Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ*
3. Michael Jackson
4. Bush’s aircraft carrier landing
5. Scott Peterson

This year’s News Abuse theme is the “soap-like” way in which the media manipulates situations of tragedies and elitist publicity stunts. The section illustrates the ways in which our media has manipulated and distracted the public from reality. The Scott Peterson case, coming in at number 5, made the perfect example of “soap-like” news. The media focused on a brutal crime in which Scott Peterson stands accused of murdering his attractive and pregnant wife. Mixed with a long drawn out trial, the result is a TV news frenzy. The stations jumped on this from the very moment Laci went missing, and they have not backed off yet. This case has received so much attention that it has proved difficult to find an impartial jury.

At number 4 on this year’s News Abuse list is Bush’s aircraft carrier landing. In a publicity stunt, George W., dressed in a bomber suit, landed on an aircraft carrier, receiving major press coverage. Under a patriotic guise, the presidential outing at the height of the Middle East conflict dominated the news, distracting the public from the real news stories taking place at the same time.

Also surrounded by controversy is the Michael Jackson hoopla, which comes in at the number 3 spot. Fans held candlelight vigils in the star’s honor; it seemed that Jackson was trying to win points in court through the opinion of his fans. He and his family spoke out on television, creating more emotion, attention, and drama. With so much else going on in our modern times, it seems a shame to spend so much time on one person.

*The Passion of the Christ* received an enormous amount of press coverage over its opening. The movie proved to be controversial, stirring the audience with its emotional accounts of the death of Christ. It fueled debate and pitted our nation against itself, making Mel Gibson the most loved—and most hated—man in America.

At the number 1 spot for 2005 is the Jessica Lynch ordeal. As a soldier stationed in Iraq, her dramatic rescue was filmed by a Special Forces unit, and she became a war hero. During her time as a prisoner of war, Jessica was abused and assaulted and was not
able to remember much. Her story is a tragic tale with a happy ending. Blown up on the news and then floating away out of sight, Jessica’s story is a testament to consequences of war and is a great example of a patriotic rescue manipulated by film.

Reality Television

During a brainstorming session early last year, the Project Censored team found that reality television shows, such as *American Idol*, were creating such a stir that they were finding their way onto the news and radio channels. Unfortunately, reality television shows are now considered newsworthy. People migrate to their television sets on a weekly basis to catch the latest update on their reality shows. This spawned our curiosity. We wanted to find out what the top 3 reality television shows were and how people felt about them. As a response to this evergrowing genre of television shows invading the airwaves, we have included the results in this year’s Junk Food News chapter. Separate from both Junk Food News and News Abuse, the reality television phenomenon demands its own mention. Here are the top 3 reality television shows:

1. *Temptation Island*
2. *American Idol*
3. *The Bachelor*

A dating show for the modern age, number 3’s *The Bachelor* has truly transformed the meaning of a “hookup.” Gone are the days of introductions by friends and family members. In today’s world, it takes a television show to bring two strangers together—that and a hefty budget and viewing audience. Once again, this television show invades a person’s personal life, cutting it open and exposing intimate moments to all. People still run to the casting calls and to their television sets. Our society is fascinated by it. The allure of finding “true love” surrounded by breathtaking scenery and a gorgeous house is still alive in the minds of many. It could happen.
The likelihood of this dream happening, as the lives of those lucky guys and gals show, is not too inconceivable. This show spawns false hope and an emotional roller coaster, possibly the two most important components of the reality television formula.

*American Idol* is reality television show number 2. The show has drawn millions of viewers each night for the last two years. It has made “average” Americans stars and has crushed many more Americans hearts as they have been rejected and told that they were no good. This show takes the meaning of “audition” to a whole new level. Rather than feel the burn of humiliation in front of a selected few people, *American Idol* contestants feel humiliation in front of millions of viewers. This show has added yet another option to the reality television lineup. It has become typical for Americans to be engrossed in the lives of these contestants—their winnings and their misfortunes. As Americans, we must ask ourselves why a show like *American Idol* has taken center stage in our lives, becoming the highlight of our week.

Ringing in at number 1 is *Temptation Island*. The temptation to watch this show is reality television at its finest. While writing this blurb about *Temptation Island*, we were trying to figure out just what the show was. No one seemed to know; we got several shows confused, not knowing what *Temptation Island* was really about and how it worked. Case in point: Reality television has become such an enormous phenomenon that show after show is developed, with few even understanding where one leaves off and the next begins. This genre is intertwined, and many reality television shows mimic each other. Perhaps the temptation should be to scratch reality TV from our selection of television viewing all together.

Reality television shows are considered to be Junk Food because of the enormous audiences they attract and the fact that they have no real value for viewers. The funny part about it is, reality shows are not really reality. There are no scripts in real life or consolation prizes at the end of a day or millions of people watching. Reality shows have tricked people into believing that those shown are portraying their real selves. In reality, they are presenting a front, going along with the game to get their 15 minutes of fame. Our
society has become such that we are driven to fit into a cookie-cutter mold, to do what others expect—and the reality show phenomenon epitomizes this trend.

In our current political climate, it is curious to be spending so much time devoted to celebrities. Most of these Junk Food News stories were on both the morning and nightly news. Junk Food News seems to be counterproductive, yet continually uses our news space. Many people neglect to watch or listen to corporate news, let alone the real news, because it is seen as depressing. News is more or less full of fluff, and even entertainment is taking on that trend. The media is misusing the mainstream space, which is a national resource belonging to us all. Quality media with diversified ideas is desperately needed in a free and democratic society in order to guarantee the continuance of a democracy.

As this chapter illustrates, much of that sacred and rare space is taken up by programming that is essentially garbage. Americans seem to be less and less concerned about real issues, about the real reality. While perhaps initially unpleasant, concerning oneself with what is really going on will allow more individuals to gain a unified voice, increasing the chance to change and further the concept of equality for all. People need to become outraged at the complacency the majority of individuals and our corporate media feel towards the discrepancies around this world. If the Junk Food chapter is a window into the soul of America, the sight is not pretty. Our country should be sick and tired of the trash that is filling our airwaves. It is time that Americans get out of their comfort zone and stop tuning out the real truth and real reality that is happening around them. And it starts with you.